

## **Winter Driving Safety**

The nip in the air, that in many parts of the country we are greeted with every morning, is a friendly reminder that winter is not far away. Daily, on our way to and from work, and for many of our employees while we are at work, we will be facing driving conditions that change with the seasons. Winter driving for many will be a challenge that may need our daily attention; others of us may suddenly find ourselves on travel or detail in driving environments outside of our comfort zones. The time to begin preparing for winter driving is now.

The first item which should be addressed before winter driving is staring back at you through the windshield is the vehicle(s) that you will be driving. Have you delayed maintenance during the more pleasant seasons of the year? Have you inspected your vehicle and its safety features, to include the lights and wiper blades, and especially the brakes and tires? If you've said either "yes" to the first question, or "no" to the second one, you should act now to prepare your car for the additional stresses of winter. The climate conditions alone will play havoc with many of your car's essential systems (heating, cooling, electrical, suspension, brakes, tires) which if they are not in good condition will quickly leave you in need of more extensive repairs later, or beside the road when having to park your vehicle was the last thing you wanted to do.

Many State highway departments, and highway patrol agencies have important information on local restrictions for road closures, tire chains, studded tires, etc. and helpful tips available on their websites. Look them up; learn what you can and can't do, and what is available to help you where you live. Much of the following information comes from several state agency websites.

### **Ready, Set...Go! But first;**

To prepare your vehicle(s) and yourself more adequately for the winter driving situations that will be encountered, here is a list of many things to keep in mind (and perhaps in your car!) to get you through to spring.

- Again, have your vehicle serviced. Many service outlets have seasonal maintenance packages available to inspect crucial items like the battery, tires and brakes, as well as topping off fluids and checking for worn belts and hoses. Replace your windshield wipers if they are cracking or tearing.
- During winter, it is advisable to keep your vehicle's fuel tank close to full. In the daytime of winter, the fuel may warm up and expand into the empty space and at night as it cools, will condense. The condensation will freeze and cause problems in the lines and/or tank. Also, if you find yourself stuck in traffic or snowbound on the road you will have an extra safety margin of more time before fuel is a real issue.
- Maintain your windshield washer fluid reservoir full with good quality fluid. In extreme climates, it may be necessary to add other antifreeze compounds. Frequently check the level, especially if used daily.

- Indoor storage of your vehicle is recommended, if possible. This will save some of the work of scraping and cleaning the vehicle, and may lessen the effects of temperature on the electrical system. For those of us who may live where the winters are very long, and can be severe, an engine block heater may be a must have item.
- Tires. Your life is riding on patches of rubber six inches wide, or less. If your tires are worn to a depth of 2/32s of an inch or less, replace them.
- Emergency kit. Many wise, experienced people prepare kits for their vehicle in mountainous areas, or where blizzard conditions may occur. If you are in this category it would be prudent to prepare a kit with articles for warmth and comfort, and for signaling (shovel, blanket, bright colored cloth for signaling, gloves, mittens, ice scraper).
- If you will be driving a vehicle not routinely assigned to you, such as a lease or rental on Government travel, inspect it first. If you need items such as washer fluid or an ice scraper, ask for them before you leave to get on the road.

### **Snow!! Now what?**

First rule to remember when you need to drive in snowy/icy conditions is to slow down. The sign may say the speed limit is 75 miles per hour, but that is in ideal conditions. Trust us, the black SUV that is passing you at 75 on Interstate 35 near Des Moines in heavy snow, may not make it to Ames before you do. Allow yourself extra time to reach your destination if you must drive; though it will vary with how well the roads have been treated or cleared, and traffic conditions, anticipate adding one minute per mile of time to your travel. This will help to avoid feeling pressured to take chances with exceeding a safe, prudent speed for the conditions.

If you are driving in rain, or on roads where it has rained and is standing in spots, do not use cruise control if you have it. It will cause the vehicle to actually accelerate if you should hydroplane in rain, or lose traction in snow/ice, making a skid much more difficult to control.

- Snow/ice/sleet will affect your safe following, and braking distances. Using the National Safety Council's Three-Plus Second following distance rule, allow yourself at least four seconds distance between yourself and the vehicle ahead.
- When starting from a stop, take it easy. If your tires are slipping when accelerating, you have little traction. Ease off the gas pedal and try again.
- Four-wheel drive or all-wheel drive systems do not make you immune from nature. It just gives you an edge in getting started and keeping going if you have good tires and maintain control of your vehicle. Stopping and following distances will be severely affected, just as in a two-wheel drive vehicle.
- If you should find yourself skidding, take your foot off the gas and steer in the direction that you want the front wheels to go. Should your car have anti-lock brakes, do not pump them if using them; use gradual pressure. If the wheels try to lock up, ease off the brake and use a lower gear to slow down.

- Should you get stuck (and it is possible to do it safely), shovel the snow away from your tires. Try driving forward and if you must turn the steering wheel, do it gently. If your tires begin spinning, stop and try again. Before trying to rock your car out, check the owner's manual. Rocking a vehicle may damage your transmission, and some manufacturers warn against it.
- Sand or kitty litter may give you more traction, if you included it in your kit. Treat the surface with it before trying to drive out.

### **But I'm not stuck, I'm stranded**

If you should find yourself unable to get your vehicle out without a tow truck or another vehicle to assist yours, it's possible that you may need to wait for several hours (or in some cases, overnight) before assistance can get to you. If you have planned and prepared a kit for this worst case event, you can get through it.

- Stay in your vehicle. If you must get out, do so for only short periods of time in order to get your kit for example, or to make sure that the exhaust pipe is clear of snow and not plugged, and your windshield and heater vents are clear. Your car is shelter, and is easier to spot than you walking along the road.
- For heat, you can run the engine every half hour or so in severe cold for several minutes. In less extreme cold, once every hour. Heating the passenger compartment every so often (perhaps for five to ten minutes at a time) will be enough to help prevent cold weather injuries. Crack a window open while running the engine to help prevent carbon monoxide build up.
- If you included a brightly colored cloth item in your kit, or have it in your vehicle (such as a blaze orange cap), tie it to your antenna.
- If you have a cell phone with you, and have not already done so contact local police or highway patrol for assistance.

With a few preventive measures, and a little planning, the effects of winter on our commuting and business driving safety can be made more manageable.